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SUBJECT: THAI ELECTIONS: PAPER TIGER CAN'T KEEP UP WITH THE MONEY

Classified By: Classified by Political Counselor Robert J. Clarke, Reas  
on: 1.4 (D)

1. (C) SUMMARY: Embassy visits to Phijit and Phitsanulok provinces before the February 6 parliamentary election revealed that allegations of vote buying and other campaign violations have a basis in truth in Thailand's "Lower North." Local Election Commission officials and NGOs there are frustrated with their inability to enforce election regulations. Well-known faces from all parties in rural Thailand remain popular. Politicians have plans for post-election contingencies for Election Day violations well underway. END SUMMARY.

ELECTION COMMISSION RESIGNED TO VOTE BUYING QUESTIONS EMBASSY INTEREST

2. (C) Poloff visited Phijit and Phitsanulok provinces just a few days prior to Thailand's first general election in four years. In this "Lower North" region of rural Thailand, agriculture and related food processing industries are the economic kingpin and local interest in all things political remains high. Civil service staff from the Phijit provincial Election Commission (EC) predicted a 75 percent voter turnout rate in the provinces four constituencies. These officials claimed that election related violence is much lower than four years ago and they reported only six official complaints of election fraud have been reported. They predicted that no "red cards" eliminating candidates will be issued, but admitted that vote buying was common since it was part of "Thai political culture." In a separate meeting with the Phijit EC Chairman and former Deputy Permanent Secretary of Education, Phiphop Karnchana, the retired civil servant appeared surprised and somewhat irritated at our interest in the elections in his province. After taking his seat in a formal meeting room at the provincial hall, the 70-something man stated loudly, "Why did you come here? Write down your questions right now so I can answer them all right now." He then continued to look at papers and sign letters as we politely discussed some of the issues that we had just been talking about with his staff, who seemed a bit embarrassed at his behavior. The Chairman then gave a nice overview of preparations for the election, stating Phijit was fully prepared for the election and there were "no problems" with vote buying or fraud in his province.

NGO SHEDS LIGHT ON CANDIDATES, DESPITE THREATS

3. (SBU) Unofficial vote monitors presented a somewhat different picture. Trakarn Kunavut, Chairman of the Phijit-based NGO, Seang Tawan Group (Light of the Sun or SolGroup), told us of his grassroots efforts to monitor elections using a network of rice farmers and small business owners that has been working together for some 10 years. These NGO members believed in some respects this parliamentary election appeared to be better than the last, with a notable drop in violence, particularly shootings among rival party canvassers. However, parties appear to be getting more sophisticated in vote buying, offering a two-tiered system of pre-election gifts, such as dishes, clothes or Buddha images to voters in early January and now following up with "bonus money in the next few days leading up to election day. Saeng Tawan (and their election-monitoring group People's Network for Election Monitoring in Thailand or PNET) had recently released a story to a daily Thai newspaper detailing vote buying by a Democrat Party (DP) Candidate. They had also brought vote buying allegations to the EC regarding a Thai Rak Thai (TRT) candidate but asked to withdraw the complaint after villagers received death threats. Trakarn commented that Phijit won't see a red card go to the TRT candidate because it's well known that one of the commissioners is in the pocket of the government and TRT party. "Since a decision to issue a red card must be a unanimous consensus of the EC, this won't happen," he said.

PARLIAMENT: IT'S A FAMILY BUSINESS

4. (C) Poloffs met with MPs from two well-known Phijit families. First, in Tapan Hin district, we met with veteran MP Adul Boonsert, of the TRT. Adul's late father was a

prominent New Aspiration Party (NAP) MP. Now, with NAP merged into TRT, both Adul and his son, Nawin Boonsert (who is running for the first time in another district in Phijit) are campaigning under the TRT banner. If Nawin pulls out an unexpected win, he would be the first third generation MP in Thai history. The elder Boonsert appeared very confident of his own chances, noting that he really doesn't need to campaign on his own, leaving it to his beloved elderly mother and canvassers. He also admitted that going out on the campaign trail on his own was risky due to the possibility of dirty politicking and fraudulent claims of election violations being thrown at him from rivals. He predicted that the TRT will win 349 seats (constituency and party list total) and that Finance Minister Somkid Jatusripitak will continue to play a more prominent role in the TRT party, possibly even being groomed as a replacement for Thaksin in four years. Adul then showed off his many cars, including a Cadillac limousine, a Lincoln Town Car and a red Corvette sports car, all guarded by several men brandishing guns under their jackets.

15. (SBU) Poloffs also met with the young, energetic opposition Democrat Party (DP) MP, Narapat Kaewthong, whose father was also a New Aspiration Party MP from Phijit province. Narapat received a yellow card four years ago for alleged irregularities that were noticed in ballots during the counting process. He was elected after a re-vote was mandated by the EC. This year, the PNET has already accused him of vote-buying, citing villagers who claim his canvassers distributed 400 baht to them in exchange for votes (100 baht was kept by the canvasser). Narapat never directly denied or acknowledged the vote buying when asked. After a long conversation over Pepsi at a hot, sunny roadside stand, Narapat finally surmised, "The real reason I'm confident I'll win is because the other party promised 500 baht per vote but is only paying 200. What an insult to the villagers!" He predicted that he will be red-carded by the EC after the election but has already made a plan. First he claimed to have a videotape of the TRT candidate at a meeting with local administration officials where the candidate actually gives out thousands of baht in advance for future vote buying. In case this blackmail doesn't work, Narapat has his younger sister running in his district under the "Thai Rak Thin" party banner, an older nearly defunct party with no current representation in Parliament. If he's eliminated and there is a revote, Narapat believes she will surely win with her name recognition. (Note: In a side conversation with members of PNET, and flanked by two armed bodyguards close at hand, Narawat said to them, "I respect your work, but you are just a paper tiger, you and the EC." End note.)

#### HILL TRIBE VILLAGES "REAPPEAR" TO VOTE?

16. (U) In nearby Phitsanulok Province, the EC Chairman Supot Pruekwan, vice rector and professor at Ratchaphak Phitsanulok provided a cogent, professional brief of the status of election fraud in his large, rural and mountainous province. The local EC expects voter turnout at about 65 percent, numerous accusations of voter fraud continue. In one area, voter registration lists include over 400 names of hill tribe villages who NGOs have confirmed have not lived in this area for years and whom no one in these small isolated communities has even heard of. As recently as last year, there were records that all of these persons voted in municipal elections. Predicting that at least two MP candidates (unnamed) will be issued red cards, the EC chair added that there have been numerous complaints about Thai police harassing voters with false allegations of fraud, illegal searches, and other tactics. (Note: The Police, upon referral from the EC, undertake initial investigations of election violations. End note.) Taking cell phone calls about various ongoing fraud investigations throughout the meeting, Suphot noted that the EC is really just a mechanism for holding elections but has no real power to monitor election fraud, let alone hold candidates or party operatives responsible for violations.

17. (C) COMMENT: Allegations of vote buying and fraudulent activities by candidates are nothing new in Thai politics, and certainly this week leading up to Sunday's election is no exception. Increasingly vigorous rounds of election day and post-election day accusations, investigation and potential re-balloting probably will continue for the next month or longer. Meanwhile, MPs with family ties, an ability to deliver to their constituents, and tried and true methods of cash-for-votes are confident that Sunday's vote will bring them another term in office. END COMMENT.  
BOYCE